

Fire Shadows: Poems

Gwen Head

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In this poetic memoir, the

author seeks to find the source of her daughter's mental illness through the vehicle of lineage. Writing through three generations of family history, she assumes the voice of her parents, her daughter, and herself both as mother and writer. All of these are inextricably connected. The story of madness, its ancestry, and the understanding of it, become part of a series of poems between mother and daughter. The women are at the heart of the struggle—ultimately, the men fall to the wayside and do not get up.

Head hits her stride in the last few sections of the book, when she really begins to interact with her daughter and her daughter's madness. As if to control a subject matter which is so out of control, Head uses strict forms: the pantoum, the villanelle, the sonnet, and the sestina. For readers interested in the state of modern formalist poetry, Head proves that the movement can be both subtle and effective. Her rhythm and repetition are non-intrusive, indeed they create a scaffolding that supports and structures its chaotic subject.

Woven into the text are literary references, from Stanley Kunitz to Tess, and a metaphor centered around Japanese stoneware. But what truly fuels the book is the intense love of the mother/author for her daughter. From the beginning, she re-envisioned her parents to better understand her daughter. She also tries to view her daughter from the vantage point of teachers and doctors; she even becomes the daughter, adopting her voice. The obsessive need of the mother parallels the daughter's search for stability. The duality of toughness and tenderness with which the author approaches her daughter is apparent in her language: "And the rosebud mouth is visceral as a hate-pinched anus. Yet, from the mother's breast, a seeking spurt of foliage twines, by which the child is made beautiful."

These poems force potent questions concerning the ingredients and conditions that foster madness.

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